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LIBRARY READING IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

I

THE SPIRIT AND AIMS OF THE WORK

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The study of the masterpieces, as it is ordinarily done in the high school, has a distinct and undeniable value; yet there is a widespread feeling among teachers that something more is demanded for the best literary development of the pupils. The concentrated study of a few selections, no matter how good, cannot take the place of a broad knowledge of books and authors. This has its own particular relation to the personal culture of the student, and can come only through intelligent and continued contact with libraries, and with people who are interested, in a positive and helpful way, in the contents and the makers of books. The recognition of this fact is responsible for the advance of the "outside reading" idea. It may not, therefore, be inappropriate to examine at some length the more important phases of this recent addition to our curriculum, considering how it may best be made of real and practical worth to our school systems.

Much of the library reading work which is now being done has a somewhat undesirable tendency. It inclines to make the reading of books a burden, and to force the so-called "standard" literature upon the minds of pupils not sufficiently developed to appreciate it. This is surely getting at the matter from the wrong end. Reading should be done from an inner desire, not from an outward stimulus. The great work of the teacher is to create the desire. The spirit of the work is everything. If the teacher is unsympathetic, if she makes of herself a task-master, and insists upon the children's reading books in which they have no interest, merely with the determination to make them take what is "good for" them, whether they like it or not, her work is

bound to be more or less of a failure. She must never forget that she is trying, first of all, to develop in her pupils a taste for literature. She must, therefore, approach her task with tact and patience, but most of all with sympathy. She must constantly draw upon her own large knowledge of books, and at the same time forget that she has that knowledge. She must be able to imagine herself a restless, action-loving, hero-worshipping boy, or even, if need be, a vapid, sentimental, feather-brained girl. She must put herself in the place of the pupil whose literary needs she is trying to supply, giving him not what she herself admires, but what his crude young appetite craves. Passing resolutely by her beloved Walter Pater, and Matthew Arnold, and Henry James, she must bestow a willing patronage upon such lesser lights as Anthony Hope, and "Ralph Connor," and Ernest Thompson Seton. She must learn even to appear politely interested in the Graustark books, and not to evince too much horror when she finds herself pursued, as she is pretty likely to be, by the *Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Some critic, who does not deal with young people, will no doubt be scandalized at this literary heresy. "What is to become of our standards," he will cry, "if our school teachers tolerate anything but the best?" Those whose work is with boys and girls may answer, "It is not that we love Walter Pater less, but that we love our pupils' happiness more." If the teacher appears shocked and irritated by what the young people are reading, she makes them reticent and suspicious. They soon learn to conceal the truth, and she fails to discover their untrained tastes and undeveloped possibilities; she loses her hold upon them, and misses the great opportunity to lead them on from a lower grade of literature to a higher. This is why the teacher should possess unlimited sympathy with the raw propensities of youth, and why she should be willing to lay aside her own more cultivated notions in order to meet the demands of her pupils. In the library reading work, as in all the study of literature, it is imperative to remember that the pupils must be taken as they are. They may not be as fully developed as their instructors would like to have them; but the work must begin

at the point which the pupils have reached, and must lead on, through unwearied patience, to something better.

The attitude, then, of teacher and pupil should be one of friendly interest and confidence. Cheerfulness should be the prevailing note in all their intercourse. The pupils should regard their reading not as a task, but as a pleasure, and themselves not as victims, but as favored friends.

The aims of the work may be many, but there is no harm in freely admitting that one of the greatest aims is to give the pupils enjoyment, since it is only by enjoying books that they can ever come to love them. It is necessary that children should be allowed and encouraged to read what they themselves find interesting, to the end that their delight in books should be increased.

The next important aim is the broadening of the pupil's knowledge and thought through contact with books, and with other minds than his own. It is impossible that a boy should be a member of a library reading class for the four years of the high-school course without unconsciously absorbing an amount of knowledge about literature and its creators far beyond, both in amount and value, the actual reading which he himself has done. Even a cursory acquaintance with books, the handling of the volumes passed about in class, the reports of his classmates on the work they have been doing, the teacher's remarks and criticisms, must inevitably make an impression, largely subconscious, but none the less valuable, concerning the relative worth and interest of books.

Information, as such, must, of course, from the teacher's point of view, constitute an aim. Among the older pupils, especially, it is possible to direct attention to books of travel, sociology, history, and science, and to carry on a course of study which will lead to a real accumulation of inspiring facts (there may be such!) on the topic under discussion. A view which goes beyond the narrow horizon of everyday life is opened up by such accounts of travel as *A Japanese Interior*, *The Mystic Mid Region*, *Our Old Home*, or *Russian Rambles*. Books that deal with sociological subjects, such as *The Woman Who Toils*,

Toilers in the Home, *How the Other Half Lives*, and *The Workers*, can give the boys and girls about to leave the high school a more thoughtful outlook upon some phases of "real" life, outside the walls of the schoolroom. Many boys, if properly introduced to the science department of the library, will peruse the longest tomes on wireless telegraphy, railroad building, irrigation, or even the nebular hypothesis and Darwinism. The information that they get from these volumes may or may not be of practical value, but it always has a certain culture value, and frequently serves to emphasize a natural bias which later leads to a life-occupation. It serves, at least, as an apperceptive hook on which to hang future knowledge. What has just been said refers largely to non-fiction books, but fiction itself need not be scorned, even by pedagogical Gradgrinds. Its information on history and other serious subjects is often very considerable; and best of all, if it is not actually false, it becomes a textbook for that most difficult and tremendous of studies, human nature.

Another end to be attained is the cultivation of ability in expression, both oral and written. The pupil is required to make reports on what he has read, to estimate, in an elementary way, the literary value of a book, and to put into words his judgment of the characters and situations set forth in the volume to which he has given some attention. He must in this work provide himself with a vocabulary for which he would not otherwise have much use, and bring into play a style of expression which it is profitable to master. The work should be almost wholly oral, thus giving an opportunity for connected and original talking, not usually available in the ordinary classes of the school. Of the written work, something more will be said hereafter; it should form a small but valuable part of the library training in expression.

Most important of all our aims, if not the easiest to keep before us, is the development of the individual—the training of each child toward a real appreciation of good books, and the enjoyment of those great benefactions which books have to give. The accomplishment of this purpose must necessarily go hand

in hand with that mental and moral development which is, or ought to be, the end and object of all the teaching of the schools. Like all the truer and better phases of education, the process is a slow one, and can be consummated only after the most careful and painstaking labor; but in the achievement it is conclusively worth while. Through contact with fine books, as with fine people, the character expands and ripens, and the individual becomes more completely the product of those influences which are most worth while in life.